

Up From the Underground

Whether you are ready for it or not, an alternative Christian youth culture has surfaced today. These teens and 20-somethings may not fit into your religious traditions, but they love Jesus.

It's Friday night around dusk, and high school and college students are beginning to gather outside a dilapidated former movie theater on Des Moines, Iowa's, rundown south side. Body piercings, tattoos, chains and vividly dyed hair decorate the 300 to 400 teens who are just starting to meet up with friends and test their skills on the skateboard ramps set up an hour ago.

Inside, red, blue and yellow tag-graffiti slather pitch-black walls and ceilings framed by crimson velvet curtains and red lights where more kids mingle. Some sport Nike T-shirts, khaki cargo shorts and tennis shoes; others wear nothing but ripped jeans, black pointed boots and spiked dog-collar chokers.

Four bands—the night's main attraction—have traveled today to play one of the state's biggest concert venues. The stage once dominated by Hollywood box-office hits now yields underground, hard-core music from Broken Image, Alto Heceta, Senator Kelly and the venue's former house band—38th Parallel. Later that night, a sea of upstretched arms jerk to the music with each throb of the drum and jagged guitar riff.

Though the scenes may call to mind images from MTV, a lot of the kids who have come here tonight to this teen-college club called Frank's House of Rock are talking about subjects that have a direct bearing on their daily lives as Christians. That's because for many of them, some of whom society would quickly label as "extreme" or "rebellious,"

Frank's is their church.

"At this place, I'm challenged to be more like Jesus," says Dave Larson, 21, who began coming to Frank's two years ago. "I grew up in church, but nothing there really grabbed me, even when I tried to find something on my own. So Frank's has really become my church."

Like Larson, a vast majority of the club's Christian patrons don't attend a conventional church, says Greg TeSelle, 34, who has run Frank's for the last 3-1/2 years. They represent a rapidly growing segment of youth nationwide who are looking outside the established churches to meet God and grow as believers.

According to researcher George Barna, president of the Ventura, California-based Barna Research Group, recent studies show that more teenagers who call themselves Christians are less likely to attend church in the next 10 to 15 years than ever before.

"That doesn't mean they're giving up on God. It just means they won't be looking for Him in traditional churches," Barna believes.

A gathering place like Frank's House of Rock—or like The Door in Dallas; New Union in Minneapolis; Chain Reaction in Anaheim, California; and Rocketown in Nashville, Tennessee—is favored over church activities by teens who say they find more acceptance and substance in these places than in conventional churches.

High school students such as Angelina Tonsi, 16, and Graham

Davis, 16, come to the city's only all-ages club because it's where they have found acceptance from peers and Frank's young-adult leaders. Moreover, it's where they found God.

Frank's and one of the 20 to 30 weekly small groups it has birthed are where Davis "goes deeper with God," he says. He's a regular each Friday and Sunday night. It's also where he and his friends share their faith with other kids who have come just to hang out.

Tonsi, who tonight has opted for hip-hugging jeans and a black tank-top over her usual punk fare, motions to her friend Casey Hart to come over. "I had some real issues with doubt," Hart, 16, says. "I guess you could say I didn't really believe in God."

"He was scared to die," Tonsi adds. "A lot of us here at Frank's have been praying for Casey and talking to him."

She points to a young man with a red mohawk and tattoos running from his shoulders to his hands. "He was one of the guys here who really talked to him and got through."

Notes From the Underground

What's drawing these teens to God but away from conventional churches? For Mike Jones, 16, who's volunteering behind the club's sizable front-room concession stand tonight, experiences growing up in the evangelical church his parents still attend turned him off.

"I felt like an outcast at that church," he says, scratching

the silver-ball stud pierced into the cleft of his chin. "I didn't fit in with anybody. I looked different than the kids in the youth group. My music was different."

At Frank's, Jones got involved in a Bible study and a small group led by a volunteer on the club's 39-member leadership team.

Tonsi chose Frank's over her family's Roman Catholic church after she returned from a rehab center where she was being treated for drug use following her mother's death.

"When I came back, no one in my church would talk to me. When you get judged, it plays on your self-esteem to the point you feel like: 'I'm crap. I don't need anybody else.'"

A friend brought her to Frank's two years ago, and she joined a small group at the encouragement of a volunteer leader. "There's people here who are just like me, who've messed up as bad as I have. No one's judging me," Tonsi says.

Others' stories sound much the same.

After coming to know Christ at Frank's, Matt Cooper, 18, now attends a small group and the club's weekly Bible study in lieu of the church he grew up in. "I just felt really accepted—something I never felt in church," he says. "I dressed differently, and people just gave me weird looks."

Cooper, who has been coming to Frank's since it opened in December 1998, has gone through what he calls a "transformation."

"I've changed a whole lot from being this smoking kid and cusser. This place keeps me on the right track," he says.

Environment is a strong draw for this young generation that has different expectations of today's church, says 38th Parallel lead vocalist Mark Jennings. Almost every day, the music group known for its combination of hard-core rock and rap is talking with kids before and after their concerts.

"These kids tell us they don't feel comfortable or real worshiping God in a traditional church environment," Jennings says. "They have a personal style that normally the church wouldn't look on as necessarily appropriate.

"I myself have experienced it. It's not an example of Christ's love when you're looked down on because your hair color's different. There are a lot of kids out there who aren't going to church but love God."

Josh Goodman, 23, hangs out with some of those kind of students during the week in his role of leading small groups and Frank's Sunday night Bible study. Kids like Graham Davis, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment with eight people.

"He has one shirt, he wears one pair of pants," says Goodman, who baptized Davis last October. "He doesn't shower often. But when he came here, he loved it because he was accepted. He walks in your average church with the kids dressed in their nice clothes, and parents tell their kids, 'We don't want you hanging out with him.'

"But this kid is an incredible Christian. He has more

spiritual maturity than half of the 40-year-olds I know.”

Russell David Hobbs, owner of Dallas’ The Door—which averages about 1,000 people each night—sees the same type of kids. Texas native Heather Owens, 17, whose favorite form of self- and spiritual-expression is larger-than-life tattoos and at least 20 rings or studs randomly placed on her 5-foot 1-inch frame, has just recently found a place where she says she can worship God and feel like a “normal human being instead of an outcast.”

Owens frequents The Door and is involved in what she calls a “very untraditional” church that meets on Thursday nights in a house where tattoos, navel rings, and tongue studs, chains and green hair abound.

“I grew up going to legalistic churches that left a bad taste in my mouth,” she says. “I tried a few other churches, but I always got the looks, and no one ever bothered to talk to me. It’s funny—I just don’t think Jesus would even want to go to churches like that.”

The scenarios are not unlike the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rejected by churches that didn’t approve of the way they dressed, smelled, wore their hair or chose their music, the just-saved longhaired hippies marched their way to the front of sanctuaries in silent protest.

However, there is a significant difference in the kids of the 21st century. Today’s teenagers, says Shawn Hedegard—outreach director for Nashville, Tennessee’s, Rocketown youth club—have a “fragile determination” to find God.

“The difference between the hippies of the 1970s and today’s kids is that these teens who feel unaccepted in the church are not going to buck the system like the hippies did,” Hedegard says. “They’ll look in a few other places hoping to see and feel something different, and if they don’t feel accepted there, they’ll move on to something else. That’s when it gets scary.”

Where Would Jesus Worship?

While lack of acceptance seems to be the No. 1 factor keeping these kids from darkening church doors, a perceived absence of substance and authenticity in churches or church leaders runs a close second. According to Barna, this group of young people sense hypocrisy, not authenticity, in the established church community.

Hobbs, of The Door, agrees. “These kids are smart,” he says. “They’ve seen the counterfeit too many times. Kids see right through these leaders and their motivations. They look around for Jesus and can’t find Him.”

Hobbs knows the story well.

“I was that searching kid. I didn’t get saved in church,” he recalls. “My janitor preached to me when I was running a secular club. After that, I started preaching to everyone and went to church because that’s what you do when you find Jesus. I tried to fit in, but everything I was reading in my Bible didn’t jive with the fakeness I was seeing at church.”

That’s what led Ed Owaki, 18, a college student in Bethel, Connecticut, to pursue his faith outside church walls.

“The reason I drifted away—and all of my friends did, too—is because God is becoming too commercialized,” says Owaki, or “Edo” as he’s known on the . Warrior Internet forum—a site dominated by fans of the hard-core-rock Christian music group . (Payable on Death). “We’ve watched our outlets for hypocrisy.”

Harry Centero, 21, also a regular on the Warrior forum, says he too sees disparity between what the church once was and what it has become.

“The church today has become so watered down,” he says. “We have our scheduled times—when a service begins, when it ends. It’s convenient. The early churches didn’t just meet together on Sunday and Wednesday. The motivation for breathing was this newfound glory.

“That’s what youth today want. They want to throw away the conservative, white-collar Christianity and find a Christ that’s real.”

Centero’s observations about his generation seem to be the battle cry for today’s youth, as 16-year-old Reeba writes in a post on the Radicals for Jesus Web site: “We now seek for something new from the church, but it simply doesn’t seem to provide much for us. The thirst is not filled.”

Phil Simmons, 18, part of Frank’s House of Rock’s leadership team, attends Point of Grace Church—which funds Frank’s as its student ministry. However, he says, the churches he’s attended have contributed very little to his spiritual growth.

“I don’t think there’s enough Jesus in church anymore,” he says.

How have today’s churches failed to capture this growing number of youth who love God and want to pursue their faith? Goodman believes part of the answer lies in the current church system.

“Kids get out of high school and decide they want to be a youth pastor, so they go to college and learn Greek and hermeneutics. Then they spend two years in seminary—six years of deep, deep stuff. In that time, though, you become irrelevant. Most churches refuse to hire someone who has an incredible rapport with kids.”

Blaine Bartel, youth pastor for Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Church on the Move, believes senior pastors hold the keys. His senior pastor, Willie George, is the force behind the 12,000-member church’s thriving youth ministry, Oneighty, which draws about 1,500 young people a week.

“A lot of senior pastors don’t see that the youth can give back to the church right away,” Bartel says. “Pastors have got to look at this long term. We’re going to lose an entire generation if we don’t do something.”

Nationwide, Barna says, only 19 percent of churches, or about 1 in 5, employ a full-time youth pastor. “The budgets churches allocate for their youth departments are shockingly minimal,” he says. “Kids are not typically seen as a great investment.”

A Quest for Community

While the inarguable fact remains that a bulk of today's young people disillusioned by the church are turning and will continue to turn away from God altogether, this century seems to be bringing up a new type of spiritually hungry youth.

In looking past the institutions for a genuine encounter with God, they reveal they believe they can experience God apart from the traditions and expectations church places on them, Barna says. As a result, they're finding alternative routes to engage Christ and draw closer to Him.

"For me, it's the small groups I'm involved with here at Frank's—not church—that have really led me into a more transparent relationship with God," says Simmons who leads two of the club's weekly small groups and participates in another. "We talk about our week. We do Bible studies and pray together. Accountability is way easier when you know someone that well."

In the same way, Larson says the small groups he's part of at Frank's not only provide a community of believers for him, but they also encourage him to pursue his faith on his own.

"Before I started with my small groups, I hadn't been very good about reading my Bible on my own," he says. "In my small group, we'd go over Bible verses, and for the first time I could see how it related to me. So I went on to reading the Bible by myself, and that made me want to really block out regular time to pray."

Relationship plus substance is key to reaching this new breed of young people, says author-lecturer Josh McDowell, known for his 30-plus years working with and studying America's youth.

“Every time, it always comes back to relationships—not clichés or MTV-style multimedia. That’s why these kinds of small groups are meeting kids where they are.”

. Warrior Centero has set up “little fellowship” groups he meets with throughout the week instead of participating in a church.

“It’s the kind of church I attend because it’s personal,” he says. “It’s not just something where there’s a hundred people there, most of whom are nameless to me.”

Centero, who at times dresses “almost Goth,” he says, with black eyeliner and black spiked boots, and wears his dark hair long, doesn’t believe he’s missing out on any wisdom an older church pastor or member could offer. Instead, the political science major by day and Target security guard by night reads books and looks to Che, his mentor he met on the Warrior forum. He and Che memorize Scripture together.

“When you do a home study, you throw away the pulpit and converse back and forth instead of a preacher from the podium telling you something you may or may not agree with,” he says. “At a church, you can’t have that kind of conversation going on.”

Perhaps the most prevalent of these alternative routes is the Internet. Whether it’s ongoing discussions about faith, devotional readings or watching broadband church services, more Christians are looking toward the Internet as a supplement or substitute to church, Barna says.

“Selena,” a frequent contributor to the message boards of , a

Web site dedicated to the pursuit of faith-based art and creativity, says she has found close friends on the boards. "It has really become my church," she says.

The Internet is one place this group of savvy users believes it can find authenticity in their relationships with fellow believers and Christ. Centro adds: "I go online to discuss spiritual things you couldn't discuss anywhere else without fear of being bashed. It challenges my faith, puts it into practice and doesn't forsake my fellowship with believers."

What, if any, impact will this cultural shift and growing trend of young people pursuing their faith without the established church have on the country's future religious landscape?

The difference will be at least noticeable, Barna says. Recent research indicates that in 10 to 15 years about 10 percent to 20 percent of all Americans will be abandoning the physical church for the cyber church, he says. He thinks part of that departure will be attributable to the trend of today's young people looking outside the church to encounter Christ.

"The church in the next quarter century is going to go through some fairly radical changes," he asserts. "Americans are less loyal to institutions than they were 10 years ago."

TeSelle believes the churches that succeed will be the ones that follow the model on which Frank's was built—a church within a church that's relevant to kids.

It's an equation that seems to be working, at least for Andy Jones, 17. He came to Frank's a year ago after being asked to

leave an area church's youth-group event because of the way he looked.

"I may not always have this nose ring or dress like I do now," he says, draped in a ripped white T-shirt and wearing black, baggy shorts that end below his knees. "But it's not really about that. This place, Josh and all the other leaders—they made me see life's worth living and that God is real."

Lindy Warren is a free-lance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee. She traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, and logged numerous hours surfing the Web to file this report.

Jesus in the House of Rock

The largest all-ages club in Des Moines, Iowa, is drawing unchurched youth to Christ.

For Greg TeSelle, 34, Des Moines, Iowa, was the last place he thought he'd be when he and his wife, Caroline, began praying about leaving the Washington, D.C., inner-city youth ministry Greg led for 11-1/2 years. Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, Minneapolis—they all were on the list of potential new homes. Iowa was a distant runner-up.

But as Greg interviewed with numerous churches, it seemed the Midwestern state was calling the couple—or at least the pastors of Des Moines' Point of Grace Church were. Intent on getting serious about reaching youth in the city, the church's staff purposed to take an unconventional approach for a congregation like theirs, which meets on the city's affluent

west side.

“We wanted our student ministries to compel kids to care about their friends who don’t know Christ,” says Jeff Mullen, executive pastor of Point of Grace. “The bottom line for us was how do we reach kids? We knew it wasn’t potlucks or ski trips.”

Enter TeSelle, a young guy with dyed hair, tattoos of crosses on his arms and no seminary education or Bible-school degree. But TeSelle had a passion for kids and the know-how to cause the gospel to have an impact on them, Mullen says. Consequently, the church hired him, gave him a budget and told him to do whatever he wanted to draw kids to Christ.

For TeSelle, that meant speaking the language of their generation—music. He began researching the city, discovering that Iowa had few music venues and even fewer places kids could go to hang out.

“At that point, I knew why God had us come out here,” he says.

TeSelle began looking for a place large enough to accommodate concerts. What he found, Mullen says, was a 12,000 square-foot, rundown movie theater in a struggling mall on Des Moines’ south side.

In December 1998, Frank’s House of Rock was born. During its first concert on Feb. 23, 1999, Frank’s drew 650 kids. Surprisingly, the punk band Squad Five-0 from the stage invited kids to know Christ. TeSelle and six young-adult volunteers ushered the 75 kids who accepted the invitation into a room to talk about their decision.

"I was hoping to plug them into a local church," TeSelle recalls, "but they all said: 'No, we want to come back here. Why can't you teach us?'"—and there was no good answer. Plus, having been to many of the churches in that first month-and-a-half, I knew there was no way these kids were going to fit in."

That night set in motion a paradigm different from the one TeSelle first envisioned for Frank's. "Our initial idea was to create this music venue to be a place where Christian kids could come and use this place as an outreach," he says. "They could invite their non-Christian friends, then when their friends had questions, they could bring them back to their churches."

But for the first year-and-a-half, local churches preached against Frank's, TeSelle says, telling kids not to come because the club allowed non-Christian bands on stage.

"I asked these pastors who were calling me up if they let non-Christians come to their church," TeSelle says. "They said, 'Yes,' and I said, 'Me, too.' As long as the lyrics aren't negative or immoral, we let bands come and play. We see it as a ministry opportunity to reach the kids in these bands."

Point of Grace Church also paid a price for its endorsement. The church has lost several parents who want a "safe place" for their kids to hang out with other Christians, Mullen says.

"We just continue to say to ourselves, 'What's the point?' It's easier for the church not to reach out, but Christ met whoever was at the well," Mullen says. "And He took heat for

it. So we expect the same.”

In the last 3-1/2 years Frank's has become a church home for many of Des Moines' high school- and college-age youth as the club's volunteer leadership team directs them in small groups, either face to face or online. The kids who attend the groups and the Frank's Sunday night Bible study even give their tithes to support a homeless ministry.

“We put their relationship with Jesus in their court,” TeSelle says. “I think force-feeding kids is a mistake.”

Point of Grace leaders hope to share what they've learned with other churches nationwide through conferences for pastors. “A lot of these kids are out there looking for something like Frank's, and most of the time they won't find it,” Mullen says. “It's a sad statement on the church. Hopefully that kicks us all in the rear. It's not like we did something so cool. We just love kids where they are.”

Outreach to the Extreme

One Oklahoma church has gone the distance to reach teens who don't feel included in traditional churches.

Blaine Bartel, youth pastor for Church on the Move, has a saying: “We just want to make it really hard for kids to go to hell in Tulsa, Oklahoma.” It pretty much sums up what he's tried to do as director of the Midwestern church's Oneighty national youth ministry, and it's served as the guiding principle for the church's progressive and expensive action to reach youth in the city.

But it was not always so. Seven years ago, the then-6,000-member church had a youth ministry that was floundering. Senior pastor Willie George purposed to pray.

“The Lord told him to go back and work with the youth,” Bartel says.

Six months later, George brought Bartel on board to work in tandem with him. Church on the Move leased a 32,000 square-foot facility one mile away, renovated its 1,200-seat auditorium to look like an Urban Outfitters or an MTV set, installed a café that offered pizza and nachos, purchased 62 arcade games, and began a transportation system with 30 buses for picking up kids in their neighborhoods.

The effort has grown the church’s youth group from 100 kids to 1,500, half of whom attend Church on the Move. Each Wednesday night, Oneighty holds two services that comprise drama, video, contemporary worship with a live band, and about 30 minutes of teaching. Afterward, kids hit the games and café facility to hang out.

“We’ve spent a lot of money to make it a very cool place to come,” Bartel says. Oneighty draws a mosaic of youth culture, he says—from jocks to hard-core kids. “Some of the kids we get, a lot of churches would label as rebellious or troublemakers and not even bother with them. They come here, and they don’t feel rejected.”

Though the social atmosphere likely is the chief drawing card, Bartel and George say the key to going beyond that and truly reaching kids with the love of God is relationships. To that

end, Oneighty develops leadership teams that direct small-group Bible studies throughout the week.

"We structure it so if a kid misses a week or two, someone notices," Bartel explains.

But status quo, even if most churches' efforts pale in comparison with Church on the Move's, isn't satisfactory for Bartel, George and their church's congregants. In an effort to double its numbers to 3,000 kids on Wednesday nights alone, Oneighty is moving this fall into a new \$6 million facility the church built recently.

The building will include an Internet and oxygen café, water bar, billiards and state-of-the-art auditorium. Within the next nine months, the facility will add a skateboard park, miniature golf course, swimming pool and go-carts.

"The building will be completely surrounded with recreation," Bartel says, adding that he and George traveled to 10 U.S. cities to research teen hangouts.

"What we learned is that the most important thing to the average teenager is social life," Bartel says. "So we believe if we can meet those needs in a wholesome environment and bring these kids into a really powerful service, we'll see them come to Christ."

He's quick to attribute Oneighty's existence and exponential growth to his senior pastor, who initiated the new building and went to the church's now 12,000 members for fund raising.

“That’s what I think has to happen all over America. Church pastors have to realize they’re not just pastoring the adults who financially support the church,” Bartel says. He recalls George’s words to his congregation a few years ago, in which he reminded his hearers that Jesus had told his disciples to feed His “lambs” and then His “sheep.”

“I’ve got a responsibility to the lambs of my church,” George had said.

Based on one kid’s story, the spiritual “food” is plentiful in Tulsa. Two weeks after 16-year-old “Chris” came to Oneighty, he was suspended from school for creating a suspicious list of classmates’ names. It was a scenario that to school officials smacked of evidence found after the Columbine High School massacre.

“When we found out about it, we met with him,” Bartel says. “He was angry—at his mother for the three fathers he’d had in the last three years, at the kids who made fun of the way he looked, at God. We just told him we loved him and wanted to help him.”

Eventually after a yearlong process of relationship-building with a Oneighty leader and coming to the Wednesday night service, Chris accepted Christ.

Says Bartel: “About a month ago, he came up to me and said, ‘I want you to know that God has called me to be someone like you who brings kids to Christ.’”

That’s pretty much what it’s all about, Bartel adds—making it hard for kids to go to hell in Tulsa, Oklahoma.